

Leonidas Donskis (ed.): *A Litmus Test Case of Modernity. Examining Modern Sensibilities and the Public Domain in the Baltic States at the Turn of the Century*. Bern: Peter Lang 2009, 314 S.

Reviewing edited volumes is a demanding task. Giving a critical assessment of the ideas of a group of authors within the confines of a two-page review poses specific challenges, challenges made all the more difficult when the volume lacks a unifying hypothesis or cohesive conceptual framework. This, unfortunately, is the case with Leonidas Donskis' *A Litmus Test Case of Modernity*. The declared aim of the book is to show, from a multidisciplinary perspective, the intensity and depth of the social, economic and cultural changes that have taken place in the Baltic States since 1991. In this it is largely successful: taken individually, most of the chapters do provide detailed and compelling evidence of the transformations of the past 19 years.

However, this volume aspires to do more than that. It seeks to show that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have become 'a litmus test case of modernity'. It is this more ambitious claim that this book sadly fails to live up to. This is not to say that the individual contributions have no insights to offer. On the contrary, the problem lies with the overall construction of the book. As a writer, Leonidas Donskis

is justly renowned, but as an editor he has failed here to weave the individual chapters into a cohesive whole. The introduction does not actually introduce us to the key themes of the book. There is no discussion of the concept of 'modernity'. How is modernity defined? Is it constituted in the social, economic, cultural, political or philosophical realms? How has its meaning changed over time? How can we tell if the Baltic States do indeed pass the litmus test of modernity? Critically engaging with these questions would have provided a theoretical and conceptual framework for the chapters that follow. Nor does this opening chapter provide much of an introduction to the Baltic region beyond Lithuania. While Baltic specialists will have no difficulty in placing the various contributions in their historical context, one cannot assume that all readers will possess this prior knowledge. Most significantly, the editor fails to introduce the individual chapters themselves, which would signpost their contributions to the overall aims of the book and thus help the reader perceive connections between the chapters. Similarly, there is no conclusion to the book in which the editor revisits key themes, ties to-

gether ideas from various contributions and thereby attempts to provide a response to the research question driving the project.

That said, some of the individual chapters are excellent. Irina Novikova's chapter on the '(In)visibilities of race, ethnicity and gender' is a fascinating analysis of the way ideas about race have been renegotiated in the post-Soviet context and how racialised (and racist) discourses have appeared in advertising, the media and in political rhetoric. Tracing the genealogy of ideas about race back through the Soviet era and beyond, Novikova highlights the negative impact that 'retro-nationalism' has had on contemporary attitudes towards non-whites in the contemporary Baltic States. As an individual piece of research, it is interesting and highly informative but it is unclear how it makes a case for showing how Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have become a litmus test case of modernity. Similarly, Vytis Ciubrinskas's well-researched chapter on the strategies that Lithuanian-Americans have used to maintain their ethnic identity and language in diaspora provides interesting insights into this issue, which is particularly timely given the more recent waves of Lithuanian migrants to the UK and Ireland. But again, it is unclear to the reader why learning the language of one's grandparents should be thought of as a sign of moder-

nity. This was probably not the author's intention but it does then raise the question as to why modernity was chosen as the overarching theme of the book. Tatjana Muravska and Kaarel Kilvits's contribution on socio-economic issues, Gabrielle Hogan-Brun's chapter on multilingualism in the EU and Aukša Balcytiene's work on the media do, at least implicitly, deal with the impact of modern technologies and strategies on economic growth, identity and news consumption in the Baltic States, respectively, while Dovid Katz's chapter on 'Holocaust Obfuscation' shows the importance of ongoing scholarship in the present to better understand the unique significance of events of the past.

However, Kristina Juraite, Epp Lauk and Vita Zelce's chapter on the professionalisation of journalism in the Baltic States is too historical for a volume that professes to be on the changes that have taken place since 1991, while the Baltic States are barely mentioned in Leonidas Donskis' own chapter on 'Nationalism and patriotism revisited'. The two chapters on memories of the Lithuanian town of Podbrodz (Pabrade) by Robert van Voren and Joe Narotzky are entirely out of place in this volume, having nothing to do with social, economic and cultural transformation in the Baltic States at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The book would also have benefitted from more careful editing and proof-reading. There are various grammatical errors and numerous words are run together or misspelt: The first paragraph of the first contribution discusses 'EU Enlargement'.

Taken individually, some of the chapters do provide interesting insights into the social, economic and political changes that have transformed the Baltic States since 1991. As a whole, however, the volume is sadly far less than the sum of its parts.

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